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ABSTRACT

Case studies can be a powerful strategy to use for helping students learn critical thinking processes that are key to interpreting and responding to literature and writing. Some of the major benefits of applying case methods are: cases provide an environment for active learning; they encourage the creation of a community of learners; cases help students tap into their prior knowledge; and cases help students come to understand the characters, concepts, and themes in the literature, primarily through discussion and debate. One such case study activity prepares students for Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "The Scarlet Letter" and also teaches students some of the skills and strategies involved in writing an argument. Another activity is designed as a prereading activity for works such as William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" or Jack London's "The Call of the Wild." The activity is designed to put students in a "survival mode." Case studies can enliven literary study, help students learn how to interpret and write about literature, and help them to become more independent learners. (Contains 19 references; appendixes contain the two case studies on which the activities are based.) (RS)

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IN CASE YOU TEACH ENGLISH: CASE STUDIES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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IN CASE YOU TEACH ENGLISH: CASE STUDIES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

By Larry R. Johannessen

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon. Creating an active learning environment is much easier said than done. There can be a variety of factors that work against success. One problem is that using active learning strategies is risky. Teachers who use active learning strategies may have to defend their use of "unorthodox" methods. They mey be questioned by students, parents, and administrators. They may be frowned upon by colleagues. For example, I remember one year when I was teaching high school, and I was using a case study that produced a great deal of student debate and discussion. This particular ninth grade remedial class was actively engaged in discussing this case that is similar to one that I am going to show you today. Yes, my students were loud, but they were involved in discussing the problem in the case; they were thinking and practicing the stategies involved in argumentation. Suddenly, in the middle of the class discussion, there was a knock on my classroom door, and when I went to see who it was, Ms. Stodgynose from the room across the hall, where you could always hear a pin drop when she wasn't lecturing, which was rarely, stuck her head in my room and said loud enough for all of my students to hear, "Excuse me, Mr. Johannessen, but could you please keep the noise down. Some of us," she added sarcastically, "are trying to teach."

This incident highlights the problem I'm talking about. It seems that the kind of active learning environment I was trying to create was so threatening to her and her traditional view of teaching and learning that she felt the need to attack what I was doing by suggesting that it was not really teaching.

Given this kind of problem, why should you use case studies or any of the other strategies? I would argue that case studies are one very exciting way to go about creating an environment for active learning. While case studies have been used extensively in

business, law, medicine, and clinical psychology, they have not been widely used in teacher education or in English teaching. I will discuss how case studies are an exciting strategy for helping students learn critical thinking processes that are key to interpreting and responding to literature. I am going to do is briefly define what a case is and discuss some of the benefits of using them to teach literature and writing and how to create a case, and I will show you one or two examples of case studies that I have used to teach literature and writing.

WHAT ARE CASES?

Smagorinsky (1993) defines case studies for teaching literature as "problematic examples of people who find themselves in thorny situations that parallel the circumstances of the literary characters" (p. 162). Case studies are often in the form of a narrative story and usually provide considerable details (a paragraph or more) and present a complex problem that requires study and analysis. Most often the study and analysis is best accomplished through some combination of writing or small group discussion, followed by a whole-class discussion and debate of the case and proposed solutions or small groups lead a whole class in an analysis-discussion. A good case study will depict the literary problem in student terms and will engage students in learning and practicing critical thinking strategies that are crucial to interpreting and responding to literature. A good case study helps students connect their prior knowledge to literary issues. You might think of them as a bridge between students' personal experiences and the experiences they encounter and try to make sense of in literature. The case study helps them make sense of what they read.

THE CASE FOR CASE STUDIES

There are several benefits teachers might expect from using cases that are derived from Merseth's (1991) analysis of the benefits of applying case methods in teacher education. These benefits include:

1. Cases create an environment for active learning. They involve students in their own learning. Students cannot sit back passively as they might in a lecture situation, but must share an active responsibility in the learning that occurs.
2. They tend to generate lively and engaging discussions. Students have the opportunity to begin taking responsibility for their own learning as they express their own knowledge, values, opinions, and interpretations about the cases.
3. Cases encourage the creation of a community of learners. By taking responsibility for their own learning as well as contributing to the learning of others, students learn to work together.

Furthermore, as Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984), McCann (1996), Smagorinsky (1993), and Smagorinsky, McCann and Kern (1987) argue:

4. Using cases prior to reading better prepares students to recognize interpretive problems and solve them appropriately when they encounter them as they read the literature.
5. Cases help students tap into their prior knowledge and build a "schemata" that will enable them to interpret and respond to literature.
6. They engage students in reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving processes. They help students observe closely, develop skills and strategies involved in argument, defining, and comparing and contrasting, making inferences, and articulating larger principles and concepts crucial to comprehending and responding to literature.

Finally, as Johannessen (1995) and Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1984) argue:

7. Using cases encourages students to read and write because they generate interest and enthusiasm for a work of literature or for a writing task.
8. Cases help students come to understand the characters, concepts and themes in the literature, primarily through the discussion-debate.

DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

I have used the first activity in your handout to help prepare students for Nathanial Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, and also to teach students some of the skills and strategies involved in writing argument (See Appendix, p. 15). A major purpose of the activity is to help students overcome their initial difficulty with the seemingly alien seventeenth century colonial Puritan society of Boston, Massachusetts. In addition, another purpose of the activity is to prepare students for some of the issues and themes in the novel, such as social responsibility, Puritanism, and the other viewpoints that Hawthorne brings into conflict with Puritanism. This activity might also be used to introduce some of the skills of argumentation, such as making and supporting claims with evidence, warrants, and/or refutation or counter arguments.

After reading the case, I put students in small groups and have them attempt to reach a consensus on whether Jennifer Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society. Then, after 15 minutes or so--after most or all have reached a consensus, some groups may not be able to agree--I reform the whole class. You might want to compile the results of their decisions on the board. I have found that this can be an effective way to focus the discussion on the key elements of student disagreement. Then, I lead a class discussion focusing on the reasoning for their decisions.

This discussion forces them to consider a large audience of their peers--just as they had to do the same thing in their small groups--why, for example, an unwed mother would or would not "lead" others in the wrong direction. In other words, the activity is structured so that students must consider the same sort of issues and arguments that they will be reading about in the novel. In terms of the thinking skills involved in argument, they must come up with arguments and counter-arguments and evidence from the case to justify their decisions. For example, in attempting to explain why an unwed mother has not lost her "character," students will have to refute the opposing viewpoint that an unwed mother is not of strong character.

Here are some questions to use as a guide in leading the class discussion or in helping small groups attempt to arrive at a consensus:

*How would you define "good character"?

*What qualifities of "character" does Jennifer exhibit, if any? How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Does "good character" have anything to do with Jennifer's situation? Why or why not?

*Has Jennifer lost her "character"? Explain.

*What does "leadership" mean?

*What qualities of "leadership" does Jennifer exhibit, if any? How does she exhibit them?

*What qualities does she lack? How does she lack them?

*Will Jennifer "lead" others in the wrong direction? Why or why not?

*Should Jennifer be admitted to the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

*What arguments and evidence will the opposing view point to? How might you refute them?

These questions help students focus in on key elements of the case and refine their arguments and counter-arguments.

It is important to note that there is no **one** right or wrong answer. As a result, these discussions inevitably lead to lively small group and whole class discussions in which students are actively debating, considering the very issues they will read about and practicing the thinking skills involved in argumentation.

Here is an example of an exchange that took place in one eleventh grade class after students had discussed the questions in small groups:

> **Student #1:** We thought Jennifer exhibited strong leadership because after she had her baby she devoted all of her out of school time to her most important responsibility--"caring for her baby daughter." She is showing others that she is taking responsibility for her actions.
>
> **Student #2:** We thought exactly the opposite. She lives at home with her parents. Her parents are supporting her and "they take care of the baby" when she is at school. If she was really a leader, she would get a job and support herself and her baby instead of letting her parents support them.
>
> **Student #1:** You're wrong. When most high school girls get pregnant, they usually hide it so that nobody knows. Jennifer is just the opposite. She is taking a lot of stuff from other kids in school. It shows a lot of "courage" to stay in school, keep her daughter, and face all the stuff from other kids. She is showing other kids that you can make a mistake and live with that mistake.
>
> **Students #3:** You just said it: "Mistake"! By getting pregnant she made a mistake that shows she lacks leadership. A true leader would not go crying to everyone about how "deeply hurt" she is by the faculty selection committee's decision because she has "worked so hard for four years."

What this brief example illustrates is how the activity engages students in the debate they will encounter in the novel and involves them in the skills of argumentation, particularly refutation. Also, they are making inferences about her true motives and drawing on evidence in the case to support their interpreations, which is exactly what they ill have to do when they read the novel and, for example, make inferences about Hester's motives for refusing to devulge who Pearl's father is and learn about the conflicting values in Puritan society.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views and rankings, you might want to have students discuss arguments and counter-arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, as well as those that were weak and why. Also, you might want to discuss how weak arguments and counter-arguments could be improved.

As a follow-up you might have students write a composition explaining why Jennifer should or should not be admitted to the National Honor Society. Students should include counter-arguments to refute the opposing viewpoint.

What is particulary gratifying about doing this activity prior to their reading is that as students read the novel, they are often quick to point to the case when they discuss their interpretations. I am most pleased when some student suddenly says, "This is just like that case we read about Jennifer Dinesen."

SURVIVAL DILEMMA: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

The next activity on the next page of your handout (Appendix, p. 16) is designed as a prereading activity for works such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," Richard Conlin's "The Most Dangerous Game," Jack London's "To Build a Fire" and *The Call of the Wild*. The activity is intended to put students in a "survival mode"--to make them think about what it takes to survive in a given environment. In addition, this activity also gives students practice in the skills and thinking strategies

involved in argumentation. This activity contains "built in controversy" (See Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen, 1984). As with the previous activity, there is no one correct answer. The activity helps students practice strategies such as generating supporting evidence for a claim, challenging others viewpoints, clarifying reasoning, answering objections from their audience, giving and explaining evidence, and criticizing faulty logic.

After reading the problem to students, I put them in small groups to come up with their solutions. Sometimes I have them come up with their own solution before putting them into groups. After 15 or 20 minutes, longer if they need it, I reform the class for discussion. I have students present their solutions and discuss differences.

Usually this activity generates such a lively discussion that often I need only use the first question and the debate begins. But here is a set of guide questions we use to keep the discussion moving and keep students on task.

*What is one thing your group decided you could definately get rid of? Why?

*Does any group disagree with that? Why?

*What is one thing you should definately keep? Why?

*Does everyone agree with that? Why? Why not?

*What items on the list haven't we discussed? What would you do with x (item)? Why?

*Let's hear your complete list of what you are going to keep and what you are going to get rid of and why?

In the small group and whole class discussions students are confronting the very kind of problem the characters are faced with in the literature and they are verbally practicing the thinking strategies involved in argumentation. Here is an example of the kind of discussion

that takes place in the whole class discussion. The following example is from a twelfth grade remedial class. They are arguing about the necessity of oars.

Student #1: There's nowhere to row in the middle of the Atlantic anyway, so why do we need oars?

Student #2: But what if they start to go over a waterfall. They would need to row to stay away from it.

Chorus of voices: No, no, no Carla.

Student #3: They are in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is an ocean. There aren't any waterfalls in the ocean.

Student #4: We thought we should keep at least two oars because if we see a ship then we would be able to row to it.

Student #5: But it says that there are strong winds and high waves. Oars are going to be useless in conditions like that.

The important point here, besides the funny things that students sometimes say, is that giving students a concrete situation results in emotional involvement in the problem. Also important is the fact that there are a number of possible solutions. Had the list of items included a number of clearly nonessential items such as benches, food storage boxes, and an anchor, the solution could be too clear cut to be arguable. And without argument the students would not be practicing the thinking strategies essential to effectively persuade others of their viewpoints, and I would not be effectively preparing them for the "survival: values under stress" problem that they will encounter in the literature.

Even though the activity primarily focuses on the physical necessities for survival, often the activity reveals values and the discussion then focuses on the social dimensions.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, I often have students discuss arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, what kinds of arguments seemed weak and why, and how certain arguments could be refuted.

As a follow-up, I have students write to convince others that certain choices of what to keep and what to throw away will give the group the best chance for survival.

CONCLUSION

Case studies can be a powerful stategy to use for helping students learn critical thinking processes that are key to interpreting and responding to literature and writing. But, in closing, I think that it is important that I emphasize a couple of things about using cases in the classroom. It isn't enough to just have students read the cases and then read the literature or perhaps write about them. For case studies to be successful, you will probably need to have students discuss and debate the issues involved in the cases and their solutions to these problem-based cases. It is through this active learning environment in which interaction and discussion are the medium of exchange that students come to understand and use the knowledge that students can learn through case studies. This kind of active learning environment encourages students to become part of a community of learners in which they take responsibility for their own learning and contribute to the learning of others. Through the use of cases our classrooms can become exciting places where students are engaged with literature and enthusiastic about writing tasks.

While case studies cannot solve all of our teaching problems, they do have much to offer. They can enliven literary study, help students learn how to interpret and write about literature, and help them to become more independent learners. Finally, they help to focus the classrom on the students and their own inquiry, reducing their reliance on the teacher.

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APPENDIX

CASE STUDIES

DOES SHE DESERVE HONOR?

Jennifer Dinesen, a high school senior, was denied induction to the National Honor Society (NHS) because she is an unmarried mother. A faculty selection committee at Streamridge High School invited Jennifer to join the school's National Honor Society but then revoked the offer when it discovered that the 18 year old had a daughter. Students are selected for the National Honor Society based on four criteria: character, leadership, service, and scholastic achievement. Dinesen met the academic requirements, but the committee felt that because she is an unwed mother her character is in question and she is not a good role model (leader) for other students.

The rules of the National Honor Society state that "pregnancy cannot be the basis for automatic rejection," but each school is allowed to set its own standards as long as they are applied consistently. The superintendent explained that Jennifer Dinesen is not the first student at Streamridge to be denied membership in the school's honor society because of sexual activity.

As a senior, Jennifer has a 3.8 grade point average. She has been a member of the Spanish Club since freshman year and served as secretary of the club her sophomore year. She was a starting player on the junior varsity girls' basketball team her freshman and sophomore years. During her junior year, she was in charge of decorations for the school's homecoming dance, and she also worked as a volunteer four hours a week at a local day care center for disabled children. All of her out-of-school time during her senior year has been spent caring for her baby daughter. Jennifer lives with her parents, and when she is at school, they take care of the baby. She has not received any discipline referrals for four years.

Jennifer says, "I'm deeply hurt by the school's decision because I have worked so hard for four years."

Questions

What is at issue are two qualities the honor society demands: leadership and character. As an unwed mother, has Jennifer lost her character? Will she lead others in the wrong direction? Do you agree with the faculty committee's decision not to induct Jennifer Dinesen into the National Honor Society? Why or why not?

Survival Dilemma: What Would You Do?

A ship is sinking, and you have managed to board a lifeboat with twelve other people. Most of the people were not able to reach the cabins to get warm clothing so they are in street clothes. One woman is in a bathing suit. The ship is in the North Atlantic, and the temperature is about 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and there are strong winds and high waves. The lifeboat has no motor, so it must be rowed. You may have to spend several days at sea depending on when the boat is spotted. The ocean is very foggy with low, heavy clouds. The boat is dangerously overloaded so in order to keep safely afloat you **must** dump 60 pounds of weight. You must decide which items you will remove. For safety reasons, you may not suspend any items from the lifeboat. You may not remove any of the people. These are the items from which you must choose:

5 slicker raincoats with hoods -- each 2 lbs.

30 cans of tuna fish (flip tops) -- each 1 lb.

a 2 gallon container full of water -- 10 lbs.

a battery operated signal light -- 8 lbs.

3 skin diving wet suits -- each 5 lbs.

2 buckets for bailing -- each 3 lbs.

4 wool blankets -- each 3 lbs.

a large S.O.S. flag -- 3 lbs.

a first aid kit -- 10 lbs.

8 oars -- each 5 lbs.

Total -- 140 lbs.

Adapted from Kahn, Elizabeth A., Carolyn C. Walter, & Larry R. Johannessen. (1984). "Making Small Groups Work: Controversy Is The Key." *English Journal*, 73.2 (February): 63-65.